

Afghanistan: Bad Options, Worse Outcomes

Sushant Sareen

Sushant Sareen is Consultant at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi

March 20, 2012

Summary

The time has perhaps come for India to make a cold, calculated appraisal of its policy options on Afghanistan. This includes deciding the criticality of Afghanistan for India's security. If it is determined that Afghanistan is indeed critical, then all stops should be pulled out to bolster the anti-Taliban forces. But if the Indian policymakers reach the conclusion that Afghanistan is very important, but at the end of the day there isn't much India can do to influence the course of events in that hapless land, then an alternative security strategy will need to be worked out. This doesn't mean completely abandoning the friendly Afghans; it only means that India pares down its involvement in Afghanistan to more realistic and less grandiose levels. More importantly, the Indian policy establishment needs to start factoring into its security calculus the fallout of a Talibanised Afghanistan and eventually a Talibanised Pakistan.

Beginning of the Endgame

Since the beginning of the year 2012, developments on the political front in Afghanistan have suddenly gathered a lot of pace. Both the US and the Taliban have acknowledged the commencement of their dialogue in Qatar. The Americans have also announced that pending withdrawal of bulk of the foreign forces in 2014, their forces in Afghanistan will cease to function in a combat role from 2013 and will only be present in an advisory, training and supporting role. Feeling sidelined by the US-Taliban dialogue, the Afghan and Pakistan governments have re-engaged to regain their relevance in the 'reconciliation' process. There are reports that the Afghans and Pakistanis are trying to open a parallel dialogue with the Taliban. Although the Taliban have denied entering into talks with the Karzai regime (which they consider illegitimate), they are believed to have kept the Pakistanis in the loop on their talks with the Americans. For their part, the Americans are also claiming that the Pakistanis are being kept informed about the process and progress being made on the negotiations front.

Meanwhile, other countries, including India, with vital economic, political, strategic and security stakes in Afghanistan are keenly waiting and watching how the Afghan cookie crumbles - will the reconciliation gambit fructify or will it only worsen the situation inside Afghanistan? Given that much of the political moves and counter-moves are taking place behind the scenes, there is not a whole lot of clarity on which way things are moving. Worse, there is even lesser trust between the various players which is naturally making all sides hedge their bets and work at cross-purposes, and thus in turn undermining the peace and reconciliation process. Perhaps this is only to be expected. No one wants to be left in the lurch, much less holding the can. What is more, there is still no certainty on what the parameters of a possible deal between the US and Taliban will be and whether a deal will be acceptable to other players within Afghanistan and without. An even more fundamental question is whether the dialogue will even lead to any deal or will it simply end in failure because whatever understanding or agreement is reached on the dialogue table could be rendered irrelevant and redundant not only by the war on the ground in Afghanistan but also by exogenous factors like political developments in, and economic compulsions of, countries comprising the ISAF.

The uncertainty about the future course of events in Afghanistan and how the Afghan endgame will ultimately play out emanates in large part from the fact that the main protagonist, i.e., the US has set too many competing objectives for itself in Afghanistan. Indeed, this has also been one of the major reasons why the US and its allies are facing failure in Afghanistan. The Americans have neither been successful in nation building, nor in pacifying the country and defeating the forces of Islamic fanaticism. An even more glaring failure has been the soft-peddling on the double-game played by Pakistan in Afghanistan. No doubt, the objectives being pursued by the Americans and their allies - ushering in democracy, protecting the rights of women and minorities, upholding

human rights and promoting a modicum of liberal values, rebuilding the Afghan state, reconstructing the war battered Afghan economy, it is a long list – were all laudable. Unfortunately, most of these objectives did not conform to the social, political and cultural ground realities of Afghanistan.

Adding to the problem is the dismal failure of the Americans to win the propaganda war. In any war, it is just as important to defeat the enemy psychologically and perceptually, as it is to defeat him physically and militarily. This dictum of warfare seemed to have been sorely neglected by the Americans. As a result, despite ousting the Taliban within weeks of launching a military offensive in 2001, the Americans have been unable to create, much less impose, the perception of victory in Afghanistan. The US success was always seen by the Taliban and their Pakistani patrons as a transient phenomenon and not something that would last very long. Consequently, even as they were retreating to their sanctuaries in Pakistan, the Taliban and al Qaeda along with their Pakistani sponsors and supporters had started plotting on their strategy to defeat the ‘foreign occupiers’. A decade after the US ousted the Taliban, the boot is now on the other foot and it is the Taliban who are on the ascendant and the Americans and their allies who are looking for a face-saving exit from a land that is often referred to as the ‘graveyard of empires’.

Four Options

It is against this backdrop that the US endgame in Afghanistan will play out. Notwithstanding the brave and resolute statements from Washington about not abandoning Afghanistan, the fact is that everybody can see that the Americans have only a set of bad options to choose from. Some of these options are bad only for the Americans and their partners in NATO and ISAF; others terrible not only for them, but also the region and perhaps the rest of the world. Broadly speaking, the Americans have four options before them:

One, pursue reconciliation and try to solve the Afghan problem through political dialogue and then underwrite the negotiated political settlement that emerges from the dialogue and hope that all sides stick to their sides of the bargain. Theoretically, reconciliation is the best option. But on the practical level, reconciliation is probably a pipedream. Not only is reconciliation spooking the non-Pashtun Afghans, it is also being opposed by the Taliban fighters who disagree with the decision of their ‘leadership council’ to enter into a dialogue with the Americans. There is also the troubling issue of who will enforce and guarantee the reconciliation deal if any side (or as the case might well be, every side) violates the terms of the deal.

While the Americans would like to maintain a few bases for at least a decade or so as a sort of supporting force, this is almost certainly going to be a deal breaker because none

of the Islamist combatants are likely to accept continued American presence on Afghan territory. Moreover, in the event that a civil war does break out, the US forces stationed in these bases are not going to be enough to restore the peace. Merely maintaining these bases which will be surrounded by hostile forces will be an unsustainable exercise. Adding to the vulnerability of these bases will be the dependence of the US on Pakistani airspace, which will keep alive Pakistan's leverage to arm-twist the Americans. At the end of the day, the idea of keeping bases in Afghanistan is not so much a strategic decision to maintain a stabilising force but more a pathetic attempt to save face and keep US prestige intact.

Two, the Americans can abandon Afghanistan lock, stock and barrel and try and control the fallout of an Islamist takeover through a combination of outsourcing (i.e. hiring a 'mercenary' state - Pakistan - to control affairs in Afghanistan), devise an international security architecture to control Islamist terrorism and use their formidable air power (especially drones) to target terrorists from the air. The problem with this option is that not just Afghanistan but the entire region will get sucked into the Afghan maelstrom. Worse, while Afghanistan will once again descend into chaos - it is immaterial whether this happens because a civil war breaks out or because the Taliban/al Qaeda combine extend their sway over the entire country - the baleful influence of this development will destabilise both Central and South Asia.

Three, continue to muddle through the mess in Afghanistan by (a) reducing its military footprint, (b) cajoling and bankrolling the double-dealing Pakistanis in the fond hope that better sense will dawn on them to not back Islamic radicals not only as an instrument of foreign policy but also as a religious obligation, and (c) pursue the inchoate and incoherent policy of 'talk, fight, build' inside Afghanistan. The problem in this case is that the muddled approach has already failed and continuing with it will amount to nothing except reinforcing failure. In the end, it will only result in continuing to bleed the US of men, material and money.

Finally, the fourth and perhaps the most sensible, if also the most unlikely option: stay the course and do whatever it takes to defeat the forces of fundamentalism and fanaticism. The problem is that with war fatigue having set in, there is simply no appetite for this option.

Clearly, there are significant political, military and economic costs involved in each of these options and the ramifications and repercussions of each of these options are serious and far-reaching, not just for the Americans and Afghanistan, but also for countries like Pakistan and India.

Cutting and Running

As things stand, developments in the last few weeks - the rioting after the Quran burning

incident, the massacre of 16 Afghan civilians by a US soldier, and the rising incidents of fragging by Afghan National Army soldiers against NATO troops which have led to the pulling out of all advisors attached to Afghan government and security forces – appear to have turned both the mood and the momentum against the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan. The US and its allies are now palpably keen on an early exit, something that the US policy makers are reportedly discussing very seriously.

For the Western forces there is very little purchase left in Afghanistan which is now seen as a bottomless pit with little or no chance of being stabilised. Add to this the other more significant challenges and opportunities that are opening out for the US and its Western allies – East Asia, West Asia, economic crisis, etc. Under the circumstances, who has the time, patience, and resources to expend on a ‘lost cause’ like Afghanistan which is at best a bad distraction? In a sense the terribly short-sighted, and in retrospect foolish, justification given by the former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski for the support for the Islamists against the Soviets in Afghanistan – “Which was more important in World history? The Taliban or the fall of the Soviet empire? A few over-excited Islamists or the liberation of Central Europe and end of the Cold War?” – will now be paraphrased to justify the abandonment of Afghanistan and shift in focus to other more profitable, fruitful and rewarding theatres in East Asia and the Middle East.

Of course, if the US abandons Afghanistan without cleaning it up, as appears most likely, it won’t be long before it will have to re-enter the place. None other than President Barack Obama has hinted as much when in a recent interview he said that “it was important to get out in a responsible way so that we don’t end up having to go back in....” This is nothing if not an acknowledgement of the possibility that there could well be another round of intervention in Afghanistan. Given the forces that are most likely to grab power in Afghanistan – Taliban and other sundry radical Islamists, including al Qaeda – there is every chance that they will once again use Afghanistan as a base to target the US and its allies which they consider as the fount of all evil and the biggest obstacle in their quest for planting the flag of Islam around the world.

Talibanised Siamese Twins

The implications for Pakistan of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan are bound to be disastrous. But this was something that the Pakistanis should have thought through when they indulged in their double-game in the War on Terror in order to retain their influence inside Afghanistan and call the shots in that country. Ironically, it is precisely the fulfilment of this maniacal desire of the Pakistani establishment that could now unravel the Pakistani state. Regardless of what happens in Afghanistan – whether Pakistan gets the outsourcing contract to keep the lid on post-US Afghanistan or whether there is a civil war and perhaps a de facto partition of the country along ethnic lines, or even the likely possibility of the Taliban sweeping aside all opposition and stamping their

domination on the entire country – the fallout on Pakistan will be unbearable.

An outsourcing contract, no matter how lucrative, will effectively ensnare Pakistan in the Afghan quagmire. The outcome of this is unlikely to be any different than what other, more powerful and much richer countries than Pakistan have suffered. Outsourcing Afghanistan will however not fend off the possibility of either a civil war or a Taliban takeover. If a civil war breaks out, the Taliban dependence on Pakistan will increase and suck Pakistan into the conflict with all the attendant consequences on Pakistan's already radicalised society.

On the other hand, if the Taliban hold sway over all of Afghanistan, it will lead to a spread of radical virulence inside Pakistan with Taliban affiliates finding a safe haven across the Durand Line. If this happens, Pakistan will have two choices: it can either cede control over large swathes of territory to the Pakistani Taliban groups to buy peace or else it can carry out operations against them. In the latter case, it will be an endless war that will sap the Pakistani state of all vitality and eventually become the cause of its collapse. In the former case, the Pakistani Taliban, after consolidating their hold in their areas, will then make a bid for capturing the rest of the Pakistani state. What this means is that the Talibanisation of Pakistan will be inevitable. Of course, one assumes that the current Pakistani power elite isn't enthused by the prospect of Talibanisation. But what if this assumption isn't correct and in fact the Pakistani establishment, especially the army (which wags often call 'uniformed Taliban'), is comfortable under a 'pure' Islamic dispensation under the 'Amirul Momineen'. After all, the Taliban are a Pakistani and not an Afghan ideological construct and will probably find much greater acceptability in the land of its origin than anywhere else.

India's narrowing options

For the last 10 years, India's policy on Afghanistan has piggybacked on the US shoulders. As long as the US policy was aimed at keeping the Taliban and other forces of Islamic fanaticism out, India's interests converged with those of the US and to a great extent India's policy and development programme in Afghanistan complimented the US approach. But now India's interests are completely divergent from the interests of the US. While India still sees the Taliban as an unacceptable, inimical and even evil force, the Americans have suddenly discovered some virtue in the Taliban. According to the US Vice President the Taliban were not America's 'enemies per se' nor did they threaten US interests. Clearly, like the Pakistanis, the Americans too will not lose too much sleep if the Taliban regain power in Afghanistan, of course with the caveat that they break all ties with the al Qaeda. To this extent, US and Pakistani interests converge while US and Indian interests diverge.

India therefore needs to make a policy independent of the Americans who will leave

India in the lurch to serve their own interests and in pursuit of their own policy priorities. The problem for India is compounded by the fact that its access to Afghanistan is through another equally unreliable country, Iran. Even if Iran were to grant India complete access through its territory to reach Afghanistan, there is still an inherent limit to how much India can do to keep the Taliban at bay and support the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Given that relations with Iran are already on a downswing because of Iranian acts of terror on Indian soil, chances are that India will not be able to use the Iranian route as much as it would like to. Without an access into Afghanistan, there is not too much that India will be able to do except perhaps for financing and training the anti-Taliban forces. India could of course use its goodwill to develop deeper linkages among all sections of the Afghan society and polity but how much use will this serve in deciding the course of events in Afghanistan?

The time has perhaps come for India to make a cold, calculated appraisal of its policy options on Afghanistan. This includes deciding the criticality of Afghanistan for India's security. If it is determined that Afghanistan is indeed critical, then all stops should be pulled out to bolster the anti-Taliban forces. But if the Indian policymakers reach the conclusion that Afghanistan is very important, but at the end of the day there isn't much India can do to influence the course of events in that hapless land, then an alternative security strategy will need to be worked out. This doesn't mean completely abandoning the friendly Afghans; it only means that India pares down its involvement in Afghanistan to more realistic and less grandiose levels.

More importantly, the Indian policy establishment needs to start factoring into its security calculus the fallout of a Talibanised Afghanistan and eventually a Talibanised Pakistan. India probably still has a couple of years to put in place a security architecture that will insulate it from the baleful effects of a Talibanised neighbourhood. This time needs to be used to beef up the security preparedness and put in place the systems that will erect a firewall around India. Unless this is done post haste, India will have no one to blame but itself for the cataclysm that is likely to visit this region in the next couple of years.